

# Movies as Suggestive of Crime Indicted and Defended

Gangs plotting minor and major crimes with the cigarette smoking girl leader afford material in building up underworld "dramas."



## Leading Women and Men Who Have Studied Problem Urge Improvement, While Producing Company Stoutly Defends Films

By MARTHA COMAN.

**A**n eleven-year-old Brooklyn boy recently pressed a loaded revolver against the breast of a companion two years his senior and pulled the trigger. The victim was taken to the hospital, where the wound was pronounced serious. The youth who fired the shot was held as a juvenile delinquent. A third boy, aged ten, son of a patrolman, provided the revolver with which the shooting was done. When taken into custody he said that he had seen holdups in the movies and was so thrilled by them that he wanted to see one in real life.

On the heels of this amazing act of mimicry by mere children comes a statement from William A. Pinkerton, head of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, that "most of the crimes committed to-day apparently are by novices and boys, that the showing of pictures of criminal acts promotes criminality, and that such pictures should be suppressed."

Henry Bataille, popular playwright of France, declares that the movie is the greatest enemy of thought and progress. The present productions, he says, are abominable. "This is not the fault of the cinematograph art itself, which may become something admirable and probably will in half a century," he adds.

A criminologist and an artist of the stage thus inveigh against motion pictures. Both are men who have had wide experience in their fields and their words must carry weight.

Do you want your boy or girl to see pictures depicting or suggesting crime? Is the motion picture an influence for evil, particularly among the youths of the country? Do pictures need more careful censoring before being presented to the children of the city or of all cities throughout the United States?

The foregoing questions obviously follow the statements of the detective and the playwright.

On the other hand, are motion pictures to be held responsible for crime? Do they, as Mr. Bataille says, "speculate upon the lowest qualities of humanity?"

The Health Commissioner declares that drugs are a thousand times more pernicious in their influence toward crime than the movies. The Chief Probation Officer of the city, to whose offices are brought all the delinquents of the five boroughs and who is in closer touch with youthful criminals than any other city department official, asserts that the smallest percentage of the city's delinquents are influenced to take up crime by seeing photoplays.

A playwright who is a novelist and a screen author expresses the opinion that the motion picture influence is decidedly harmful to the young. He suggests that special pictures be made for boys and girls, that they be passed upon by a board of parents, and that Wednesday be set aside as a children's motion picture day, when only pictures made especially for them are shown.

A city magistrate, to whose court are brought all the girl and boy truants from continuation school who are past sixteen years of age, holds the view that motion pictures, on the whole, are not harmful. He optimistically asserts that the world is steadily growing better.

A young woman playwright and member of an organization to promote better motion pictures defends this form of entertainment for the young. Pictures are no more dangerous to the young than are the stories of Horatio Alger and Nick Carter, she declares, and suggests that citizens concern themselves with finding employment for and looking after returned soldiers instead of decrying screen productions.

And the motion picture producers, invited to present their side of the case, pronounce the present outcry against photoplays a part of hysterical and poorly founded blue law and reform agitation. Only a small percentage of pictures depict crime and a still smaller percentage show wrongdoing that children would understand and therefore mimic, is the statement of a leading producing firm.

The baleful influence of the American movie has been extended to France, according to recent transatlantic bulletins which decry the Wild West type of hero shown on the screen and whom hundreds of boys are imitating. Gangsters known as "The Black Swans" have thrown the residents of one of the suburbs of Paris into a panic by their desperate acts. These acts, authorities on crime assert, could not have been staged or accomplished but for the instructive cinema.

A fourteen-year-old boy tried to murder his mother with a wine bottle and when questioned by the judge he confessed that he had seen an American actor win applause for the same deed.

The juvenile court of Paris records to-day 1,400 delinquents, as against 300 a few years ago. Henry Rollet, a juvenile court official, says that in nine cases out of ten the culprits declare they received their inspiration to perform wicked deeds from the motion pictures. Mr. Rollet says the American films teach how to open safes, force locks and to prevent finger marks from showing.

French social workers, however, exonerate the American film and remind France that during the war period boys were permitted to run wild. French officials are considering establishing a more rigid censorship and prohibiting youths under sixteen from attending motion picture theatres even when accompanied by parents.

Revolvers, often handled by women and children on the screen, furnish important material in filming "tense" moments of screen plays.



**MISS RITA WEIMAN**, short story writer, playwright and more recently writer of motion picture scenarios, considers it shocking that returned soldiers are being allowed to go without work, food and clothing while the estimable citizens bother their heads with the motion picture's responsibility for the increase of crime.

"The moving picture is no more dangerous in its influence than the stories of Horatio Alger," she declared in defence of pictures. "The boy who will be influenced to hold up



MISS RITA WEIMAN.

and sand bag and rob and murder through the movies would probably have been equally influenced by Nick Carter. He would manage to read these books on the sly if they were denied him as Chicago's Chief of Police is about to deny him the dangers of the screen.

"Chicago's distress over the crime wave might better concern itself with actual conditions than with imaginary ones. This whole country and its citizens might better concern themselves with finding employment and looking after returned soldiers who fought for them and, in more than one instance, have been forced into crime through their inability to find decent work.

## Few Films Depict Crime, Say Defenders

**O**f this group of men and women whose opinions were asked on the motion picture evil the majority absolve the movie. Fairness in the discussion of the subject demands that the movies themselves be asked to reply to Mr. Pinkerton's accusation. The Goldwyn Pictures Corporation makes the following statement:

"The contention that motion pictures are responsible for wrongdoing among children recalls much the same assertions that were made in regard to the comic supplements in Sunday newspapers when they first appeared a number of years ago. It was urged at that time that the presentation of mischievous children led other children to attempt the same pranks. Assertions of this kind were soon dropped, because they lacked weight and importance.

"The present outcry against motion pictures as a detrimental influence on the young seems to be a natural part of hysterical and poorly founded blue law and reform agitation. A number of systematic investigations have been made, and none of them so far reveals that youthful crime has been to any appreciable degree aroused by motion pictures.

"In the first place, only a small percentage of pictures depict crime, and a still smaller percentage show wrongdoing that would be understood by children, and consequently it could not be imitated. For example, dramatic plays often are based upon frauds of various kinds relative to the owning of property or the misdirection of inherited wealth. Obviously crimes of this nature do not impress a childish mind, which is entirely unfamiliar with such matters.

"It should be noted that in practically no instance is a child character in a motion picture presented in an evil light. Generally the child is the victim of the wrongdoing

"It is a shocking thing to pick up our newspapers and find recorded almost daily the fact that veterans of the war are becoming criminals because they have come back to their own to find not only lack of interest but, in many cases, absolute indifference, by their own. I mean not their kin, but the big family of Americans for whom they fought and bled.

"Recently one of my friends, an officer in the overseas army, was approached by a beggar while walking in Thirty-fourth street. The former army officer noticed that the beggar's trousers were torn at the knees. He wore no overcoat and his coat was torn. My friend noticed that the young man wore a service button, and, upon questioning him, learned that he had been at the front for two years, had been twice wounded, had contracted tuberculosis while overseas, was about to undergo a second operation on one eye, and on returning to this country after having been discharged from the army had gone West because he could not stand the New York climate. There he worked at odd jobs until finally he was left stranded and returned East, thinking he could collect the pay which was still due him from the Government and which had been held back through red tape.

"He was not only unable to collect the money promised him through an indefinite length of time, but he was unable to find employment of any kind because of his weakened physical condition, and when my friend met him he had not even the price of a meal. If that young man in desperation had held up some one it could scarcely be blamed on the influence of the motion pictures.

"We Americans are inclined to indulge in wild enthusiasms that are momentary, giving gladly and voluntarily of ourselves, but unfortunately we forget so easily. Perhaps this is true of other nations as well. It is undoubtedly a human trait, but it seems to me that in discussing the crime wave the Chicago Chief of Police, Mr. Pinkerton, the police of other cities and the Government should get at the fundamentals and not the Nick Carters of the screen."

## Screen as an Educator, But Care Is Needed

**D**R. ROYAL S. COPELAND, Health Commissioner, when asked if he agreed with William A. Pinkerton, the detective, as to the pernicious influence of motion pictures upon children, expressed the view that pictures on the whole were both educational and valuable.

"I would analyze the movies as I would the comic sections of the Sunday newspapers," he said. "I am not sure but there are certain pictures in some Sunday papers that are just as detrimental to a child's morale as the movies. Yet I doubt that either the Sunday supplement or the movie can be looked upon as a menace. The movie provides an education for the children of to-day that the children of no other generation received. If I could have my way I would introduce stereopticons into every school in the city.

"The public is the best censorship that can be put upon pictures. The public will not go to see a really bad movie. Yet it will flock to see a good picture.

"Crime to-day is due more to narcotics than to motion pictures. We have had in our care in the last few months every gunman, porch climber, pickpocket, practically every major and minor criminal in the city. They have been brought to our clinic at the Riverside Hospital or to one of our other institutions. If you investigate these criminals you will find that petty thievery, robbery and all crimes where profit is involved are committed in almost every case for the sole purpose of getting money or valuables that can be converted into money, with which to buy more drugs. I consider that the danger of narcotics is a thousand times more to be feared than motion pictures."

At this point in the interview Mrs. Copeland, wife of the Commissioner, entered the office, and the head of the Health Department appealed to her to give her views on the influence of the movie. Mrs. Copeland

had just come from a motion picture theatre. She is a "movie fan," and declared, speaking generally, that the movies are educational, entertaining and amusing to children. She often takes her little boy, but is careful to find out in advance the story of the picture. "Such pictures as 'Way Down East' and 'Over the Hill to the Poor House' are beautiful and children enjoy them," declared Mrs. Copeland. "But there are other pictures, where crime, drunkenness and quarrels between men and women are shown, that children should not be permitted to see."

"I should like to have a special day—Saturday afternoon, for instance—set aside for the children at the motion picture theatres and on that afternoon only the best and most beautiful pictures should be shown. The afternoon would be better than the morning, because often children have certain home duties to perform in the morning. And I do not favor permitting children under 14 years of age to go to the theatre at night. At the Saturday matinees for children there should be pictures of the type in which Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford are featured. These are always entertaining and wholesome for boys and girls."



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## Have Juvenile Matinee, Says Scenario Writer

**C**OSMO HAMILTON, writer of plays, books and scenarios, who is delving deeper in the last named field, also advanced the idea of a special motion picture day each week for boys and girls. Mr. Hamilton suggested Wednesdays.

"Only about 2 per cent of the pictures shown on the screen to-day are harmless, considered from the point of view of their influence upon the child," said Mr. Hamilton. "Douglas Fairbanks's pictures do no harm, neither do they do the child any good, because they are exaggerated and deceptive. Mary Pickford's pictures do good. But there are thousands of others that are an evil influence because they are rough

stuff and drive. Children should not be taken to see such pictures.

"Why doesn't the trade look closer into the child's market, make a careful and thoughtful study of it? It would be worth while morally, educationally and commercially. They could open a child's studio solely for the production of pictures for boys and girls. Think, for instance, of the interest children would have in pictures made from Louisa M. Alcott's books, from Grimm's fairy tales and the Waterbabies. Many other delightful stories could be produced for their benefit. Instead of having pictures done down to the child's level they could be done up to the child's level."

"Supposing that a screen artist, one of the type of Maxfield Parrish, who does charming illustrations for children's books, should make pictures for children. They

## Bad Home Influences Worse Than Bad Films

**E**DWIN J. COOLEY, chief probation officer of the Magistrates Court of New York city, disagrees with Mr. Pinkerton.

"We haven't found any substantial evidence to warrant the statement that crime is suggested by or is caused by motion pictures," said Mr. Cooley. "Occasionally we have a case where the desire to commit a crime can be traced to the influence of some picture or series of pictures, but we find so

many other more vital causes that produce delinquency and crime that we pay little attention to the picture element.

"We have the biggest clinic in this country, probably in the world, right here in New York city. All the delinquents of the five boroughs are brought to us. The factors that enter most largely into the bad conduct of boys and girls are lack of home influence, lack of good companionship, lack of wholesome recreation and lack of church influence.

"We become better acquainted with the city's delinquents, the future criminals, some of them, than detectives do. And we learn the causes of delinquency. We have an opportunity to study the conditions in which the bad boys and girls of the city are reared. Our department has no data to substantiate the statement that the showing of pictures of criminal acts promotes crime. The smallest percentage perhaps of these boys and girls is influenced by the motion pictures, but the percentage is indeed very small."

"Nothing would please me more than to give about two years of my time to developing children's pictures. Why shouldn't children be catered to? There is nothing on the stage for them to see. The only play I can think of now is Faversham's 'The Prince and the Pauper'."

"There are certain rudimentary elements that a children's picture should depict, yet these should be camouflaged. These are obedience to parents, loyalty and reverence. "I should like to see Children's Wednesday become a universal day at the motion picture theatres. Pictures to be shown on these afternoons might be passed by a board of good taste. I don't want a board of censors. Best of all would be a board of Peter Pans, men and women whose minds still retain an appreciation of what children love best, who haven't grown up so that they have forgotten what children like."

"I am convinced that if some group of artists and women who have children, persons who understand babies, opened a studio of their own and produced pictures for children; if they engaged the most charming children to play in them; if they were assisted by the best color artists we have, there could be turned out from such a studio enough pictures to give different matinees every Wednesday.

"This would prove a big commercial success, I feel sure, and would fill a long felt want in the hearts of both parents and the public."

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## Discrimination Needed If Children Attend

**M**RS. JAMES SPEYER is honorary president of the Motion Picture Theatrical League for Better Pictures, a recently organized group of men and women prominent in arts, letters, science and commerce who have banded together to raise the standard of motion pictures. When asked whether she considered the pictures shown to-day harmful or beneficial to children, Mrs. Speyer replied: "Pictures that are humane, instructive and educational are good for children to see. But when they are otherwise children should not be taken to see them."

## City Growing Better, Truancy Figures Show

**M**AGISTRATE BROUGH, who presides at the Municipal Term Court, to which are brought the worst cases of truancy of girls and boys over 10 years of age attending continuation schools, expressed a hopeful view of the citizens of the future.

"Glorifying crime, showing how pickpockets and burglars work, doesn't do any good, yet it doesn't do a great deal of harm," said the City Magistrate.

"The gangs in the city are pretty well stamped out. We find from statistics that 76 per cent of our probationers make good. We never see them again in the courts. That doesn't look as if crime were increasing among the young, does it? The city isn't growing any worse; on the contrary it is growing better all the time. Social agencies are influencing the bad girls and boys for good."

## Seeking Names of These Soldiers

**S**EEKING to fulfil a war time promise he made to members of the Eighty-sixth Aero Squadron while they were stationed in England, A. Harkness-Beckton has asked THE NEW YORK HERALD to assist in his efforts to learn the names and addresses of the Americans he photographed at Shoreham-by-the-Sea, Sussex, before the squadron went into service across the English Channel. Military regulations prohibited carrying pictures to the Continent; consequently Mr. Harkness-Beckton promised the Americans he would keep the photographs until the time came when there would be no such

restrictions. In far off West Africa now he finds that his list of addresses to which he was to forward the photographs has been lost, and he cannot remember even the names.

With the suggestion that "perhaps you can find some of your boys among them" Mr. Harkness-Beckton enclosed five of the photographs in his letter to THE NEW YORK HERALD. The pictures show groups of three or four members of the Eighty-sixth Aero Squadron with a motor truck as a background, and in two of the prints a little girl appears. Mr. Harkness-Beckton gives his address as: Care the S. M. O., Sierra Leone, West Africa.

